DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 068 833 AC 012 970

AUTHOR Niemi, John A.
TITLE The Meaning of Lifelong Learning.
PUB DATE 12 Oct 72
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the annual conference of the Northwest Adult Education Association (Missoula, Montana, Oct. 12, 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Adult Educators; *Behavior Change; *Concept Teaching; *Continuous Learning; Data Collection; Interdisciplinary Approach; Learning Activities; Legislation; Media Selection; *Problem Solving; Skill Development; Social Factors; Universities

ABSTRACT

A concept of "learning" generally accepted today is that of a lasting change of behavior as a result of experience. The experience itself involves such things as the gathering of information and the acquiring of intellectual and social skills whereby to put this information to work for whatever purpose the learner has in mind. The concept of lifelong learning generally embraces both learning by chance and learning by design, and it has three dimensions--perpendicular, horizontal, and depth. The perpendicular includes formal learning throughout the life-span, from nursery school through post-doctoral work. The horizontal evisages breaking through the artificial barriers surrounding a field of study to unite with other fields in a cross-disciplinary pattern. The third dimension, depth, transcends all formal approaches to reach almost a metaphysic. One problem affecting lifelong learning is the threat of compulsion created through legislation and social pressure, aiming to transform lifelong learning into lifelong schooling. Instead of participating in learning, the individual may find himself undergoing compulsory adult education which would undermine the humanistic element. Another problem is the tendency to treat the concept of lifelong learning as a kind of popular cliche or slogan to be used to promote adult education offerings. A strategy proposed to foster lifelong learning is to work through existing schools and universities to diffuse the concept as widely as possible to educators and students alike. Adult educators need to learn to use the media consistently and efficiently and help adults acquire the skills needed to embark on their own styles of lifelong learning. (Author/CK)

ED 068833

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

THE MEANING OF LIFELONG LEARNING

1972 Annual Conference of the

Northwest Adult Education Association

October 12, 1972.

Dr. John A. Niemi

Associate Professor of Adult Education
Department of Adult Education
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

AC012970

FILMED FROM BEST AVAILABLE COPY

As we sit comfortably here in Missoula, basking in the hospitality of the Big Sky country, we might shift our gaze from the present and look into our "rear-view mirror" at our personal learning projects of a dozen years ago. Then we might shift our gaze to a crystal ball, spanning time and space to visualize our own learning projects in 1984. Does the mere thought of that year bring to your minds a regimented society based on brainwashing, the distortion of history, and Newspeak? Or do you have a more hopeful and humanistic view of the future? Whatever your view or mine, it will almost certainly influence, and be influenced by, our concept of "lifelong learning" and the way we apply that concept in our daily tasks as adult educators.

You may respond by saying that no one can accurately predict the future, and I would have to agree. But it seems obvious, as the author of Future Shock reminds us, that our present problems are going to proliferate and to deepen in intensity; and people are going to have to be prepared to cope with them. They consist of major social problems like pollution, crime, and poverty, and those are aggravated in people's minds by the staggering weight of information overload. Because lifelong learning holds out the promise of helping all of us cope with social and other problems, it is vitally important that we gain a clear understanding of what is meant by the concept and what its implications are for us. Indeed, I think that the planners of this Conference have been very perceptive in organizing it around this particular theme.

The concept is, of course, not a new one. In 1955, Grattan alluded to it indirectly in his monumental historical perspective on adult education called In Quest of Knowledge. He pointed out that "no education that has a terminal point can ever fully meet the needs of life, whether the terminal

point is reached at fourteen, eighteen, twenty-two or twenty-six."[1] And in 1961, Alan Thomas proposed the "learning society" in these words:

> We...offer as our central concern not education, in its formal and institutional sense, but learning. Whatever the explicit and various goals of the multitude of agencies which we are associated with or represent, we have one common concern, the ability of human beings to learn continuously, and the conditions under which learning best takes place. These conditions are the foundations of the learning society.[2]

These insights of Grattan and Thomas are good starting-points for the topic of my address, "The Meaning of Lifelong Learning." I propose to begin by discussing, first, what lifelong learning is and, then, what lifelong learning is not--or perhaps I should say, some problems or misunderstandings relating to it.

A concept of "learning" generally accepted today is that of a lasting change of behaviour as a result of experience. The experience itself involves such things as the gathering of information and the acquiring of intellectual and social skills whereby to put this information to work for whatever purpose the learner has in mind. Now, all of this sounds like formal classroom learning, and, unless we are careful, we might stop right here. We might forget that learning can and does take place informally in the societal setting. Such learning is referred to by adult educators as "learning by chance," as opposed to "learning by design." The latter occurs when we deliberately create a situation to the end that an individual or a group will learn new behaviours.

As for lifelong learning, this concept certainly embraces both learning by chance and learning by design and, according to J. Roby Kidd, it has three dimensions--perpendicular, horizontal, and depth. The perpendicular includes formal learning throughout the life-span, from nursery school through post-doctoral work. The horizontal envisages breaking through the artificial

barriers surrounding a field of study to unite with other fields in a cross-disciplinary pattern. Roby Kidd's third dimension, depth, transcends all formal approaches to reach almost a metaphysic. It is, in his own words, "learning responding to simple needs on up, and to the most agonizing or most sublime search for the truth that 'sets us free.'"[3]

Another approach to understanding the concept of lifelong learning is to examine the French concept of "education permanente," which includes the following:

> ...elements of basic education (...in France from age 6 to 16), vocational schooling (generally outside the period of compulsory schooling) and further education in the dual form of further vocational training and opportunities for cultural leisure pursuits. [4]

A basic principle of "education permanante" is <u>continuity</u> between the education of young people and the education of adults--and not continuity in its usual sense of no break or interruption. There is provision for the young person and the adult whose education has been interrupted to resume it at the point where they left off.[5]

I said earlier that I would treat of some problems or misunderstandings that relate to the concept of "lifelong learning." So far we have found that it includes both formal and informal situations in which changes of behaviour occur. In the past, such learning was regarded as voluntary. Now, as John Ohliger points out, there is a perceptible trend toward <u>compulsory</u> adult education; and this element of compulsion created through legislation and social pressure, threatens to transform lifelong learning into lifelong schooling. Ohliger's concern is that the adult's dignity and his freedom to learn may be violated.[6] I see another problem: that instead of participating in learning, the individual may find himself undergoing compulsory adult education which would then, in my opinion, seriously undermine the humanistic element which

many of us feel should be the cornerstone of our philosophy and practices.

The institutionalized nature of such activity may well reinforce the prevalent tendency among adults to confuse learning with schooling, and to resist both. They do so because they have built up anxieties toward formal learning as a result of unfortunate experiences in school during their early years. Not only have they tasted failure in many cases, but their memories consist largely of an authoritatian teacher dispensing to them information prepared with little regard for their needs or interests. Hardly an inspiring picture! Freire calls this the "banking"theory of learning. Perhaps I could best illustrate it by relating to you an anecdote from my days at Fort Richardson, Alaska, where I worked as a civilian Educational Advisor at the Army Education Center. Prior to the start of our on-duty classes in adult basic education, a sergeant reported to me. I welcomed him and asked him what I could do for him. His reply was this: "Mr. Niemi, I've got the boys here now, and I want you to give us some smarts." The remark is funny, yet--make no mistake--it illustrates the expectations of many uneducated adults with respect to learning.

Another problem threatens us if we treat our concept of "lifelong learning" as a kind of popular cliche or slogan to be used to promote our adult education offerings. To do so is to assume that everyone knows what it means--or, what is worse, to assume that everyone shares our particular understanding of the concept and is prepared to take part in our formal programs for adults. In fact, "lifelong learning," appearing as a banner in our promotional material, may be totally incomprehensible to most adults. After all, our emphasis in education from nursery school through university and beyond is always on <u>finishing</u> our learning, not on continuing to learn throughout the

life-span. We talk of finishing elementary school, finishing high school, finishing college, and finishing our doctorates. As adult educators, we even advertise G.E.D. classes to help a person finish high school, or college credit courses in order to finish a degree. Finally, when a man retires from his job at 65, we say that he has finished his life's work--and usually, in society's eyes, he has finished his usefulness as well.

It seems to me that this problem--this North American obsession with finishing our education or our work, as though getting done with some unpleasant chore--this problem is a fundamental one that, by and large, we adult educators have not faced up to. Are there any solutions, any ways in which we could at least begin to communicate not only to adults, but to the young people who are coming up, a genuine understanding and appreciation of the concept of lifelong learning? As the idea really is an innovative one for many people, we need to consider how best to use the diffusion process in which we can all claim some expertise. One approach would be to support a revolutionary change of the kind proposed by Illich, who wants to de-school society. You remember that he suggests replacing the traditional school by a series of informal educational networks, e.g., elders and peers, with financial resources placed in the hands of the learners.[7] Certainly, we all have impulses to "shatter this world to bits and re-mold it nearer to the heart's desire," as the poet said, and any basic revolution in education is bound to open up new channels of diffusion. But would Illich's "marketplace" model really provide any creative alternatives? Or would his model replace one bureaucracy with another; for example, would commercial firms supply materials now supplied by the schools?

Another and better strategy, in my opinion, would be to work through the existing schools and universities to diffuse our concept of "lifelong learning" as widely as possible to educators and students alike. Here we have to ask ourselves an important question and to answer it as honestly as possible: Have we really exploited the possibilities of co-operating with school and university educators, sharing ideas and practices with them--and especially emphasizing lifelong learning as a desirable goal--or have we remained generally aloof, seeing little of common concern? This notion of sharing is one that is strongly advanced by Malcolm Knowles, a native son of Montana who is now a professor of adult education at Boston University. According to him, "andragogy" (adult education) has much to offer pedagogy.[8] Pedagogy, in turn, would afford us an indispensable channel of communication for our concept of lifelong learning. If school and university administrators and teachers could be persuaded to move in this direction, it would, of course, be necessary for them to re-structure some elements of their philosophy and some of their educational goals. Learning would no longer be thought of in terminal or "finishing" terms or as confined solely to an institution under the supervision of an instructor. School and university would become not the whole, but simply parts of an on-going process of lifelong learning.

What about the problem of diffusing our concept among adults who have passed through schools and universities? How do we help them to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to live with any sense of confidence or control in a society that seems destined to undergo radical changes, at an ever accelerating pace, into the distant future? It must be remembered that many of these people grew up during an era when learning was conceived of as a terminal activity which prepared one for a certain niche that he would probably occupy

for the rest of his life. There seemed little likelihood of drastic social chance within his life span and, consequently, little perception on his part of either the meaning of lifelong learning or of a personal need for it.

To be sure, many of the adults we are talking about--those who have completed their school or university work--are presently enrolled in adult education programs. Johnstone and Rivera estimated in their study called Volunteers for Learning, published in 1965, that more than one in five adults had been active in one form of learning or another during the twelve-month period of the study.[9] While that ratio offers encouragement to adult educators, we don't really know whether the participation was on a one-shot basis or part of a continuing pattern. And a lot of adults in the category we are talking about are unaccounted for.

Here I would like to return briefly to the sub-group comprising the retired or the about-to-be-retired. "Disengagement" is the euphemism currently in vogue to describe what is to many persons a traumatic experience. It is especially so for those who grew up in the era I have described, when the concept of "lifelong learning" was virtually unknown. The point I want to make is that this problem must not be allowed to continue. We must help these people to prepare themselves for their retirement years--not when they suddenly arrive, but long, long before, when these people are young. It is then that they need to grasp and appreciate the meaning of lifelong learning--whether in liberal arts or in vocational and cultural enterprises. Such an attitude would enable them to look forward with anticipation to retirement as a time to expand their old interests and cultivate new ones, instead of falling into apathy or contriving "hobbies" from which they derive little satisfaction.

Perhaps the most difficult sub-group--or I should say sub-groups--among the adults we are trying to reach and convince of the value of lifelong learning are the poor. A major problem of communication between them and the adult educator arises from the vastly different perceptions of reality entertained on both sides. What are the bases of these different perceptions of reality? Adult Education and the Disadvantaged Adult presents many studies which suggest that these perceptions are shaped by different value systems and attitudes. Although the diverse groups constituting the poverty sub-cultures make it difficult to generalize, it has been found that many of them uphold value systems that are clearly at variance with those of the dominant society. Because they foresee no future that differs from the present, these groups tend to pragmatism and "present" orientation, i.e., immediate rewards, whereas the dominant society leans toward future orientation and deferred rewards. Also, as a response to discrimination by the dominant society, many groups are inclined to reject its instititional structures in favour of "small personal kinship, locality or friendship groups."[10]

The different perceptions of reality I have mentioned inevitably give rise to different assumptions and stereotypes on each side, making communication between them difficult. The question arises: Is there any way in which we can reach this group and at least start them thinking about what we mean and are trying to accomplish under the banner of lifelong learning?

We might get some help with answering this question by examining one strategy by which communication has been successfully established with these people. I refer to the use of film or the VTR to facilitate dialogue within a community, as a means of helping its people not only to discern their problems more clearly, but to take a direct hand in seeking creative solutions.

A good example is the project launched by the St. Jacques Citizens' Committee of Montreal:

> They went out into the streets and interviewed the people about their problems, in order to learn more about the neighborhood and to make people think about what could be done. Then an edited half-hour tape was used to analyze discussion at the beginning of a series of public meetings. The procedure was very effective; people plunged into the heart of the discussion, instead of being fearful about expressing themselves. The citizens also learned a lot about themselves by viewing themselves in action during meetings and discussions.[11]

The approach is similar to that advocated by Paulo Freire, whose concept of "conscientization" has been described as follows:

> ...the process in which men, not as recipients, act as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality.[12]

These remarks about the use of film or VTR lead us naturally to think about the mass media and how we could employ them to disseminate our concept of lifelong learning to all adults and to the youth with whom we, as adult educators, want to communicate. Are we already using the media to their maximum potential? Certainly, a great deal of "learning by chance" goes on there, and we have an excellent opportunity to help people learn by design. To do so effectively, we need to realize the strengths and the weaknesses of the various media for our purposes; and we need to work closely with the broadcasters, who possess the skills of interviewing and script writing and who have acquired a "style" by which they can make an impact upon their audiences. We adult educators can, in turn, share with the broadcaster our knowledge of adult learning principles and our command of the adult learning process. Such collaboration would be fruitful on both sides. A good example of the kind of collaboration I mean is the U.K.'s "Open University," in which

the talents of educators and broadcasters have been pooled for the purpose of offering degrees to adults outside of formal institutions.

By the way, cablecasting offers us an opportunity to collaborate with broadcasters and members of the community on programs focussed on community concerns. Vancouver's Channel 10 is a case in point. My class in Mass Media and Adult Education at U.B.C. have used its resources--and so have other educators in the community--to air issues ranging from the problems faced by skid row inhabitants to the concerns of teachers in British Columbia.

One important point that I haven't touched upon is that many adults lack the skills or tools by which to learn. This lack, and the anxiety it may engender, could be a real obstacle to us in trying to convince adults of the value of lifelong learning. How are they going to accept our argument if they don't possess, or even know about, the skills needed for lifelong learning. I mean such skills as listening intelligently (e.g., to grasp the major idea); locating, analyzing and synthesizing information; making inferences and judgments; and so on. Have we taken for granted that most adults have such skills? If so, perhaps we should reconsider.

In closing, I sincerely hope that my remarks have shed some light on the concept of lifelong learning and some problems associated with understanding it and diffusing it. In summary, as adult educators, we need to establish closer ties with schools and universities, learn to use the media consistently and efficiently, and help adults to acquire the skills needed to embark on their own styles of lifelong learning. The ideal at which we are aiming is nothing less than an enlightened society, committed to the philosophy and practice of lifelong learning--what Thomas calls "the learning society." Obviously, we have a lot of gearing up to do, as the title of the conference implies.

REFERENCES

1. C. Hartley Grattan. In Quest of Knowledge. New York: Association Press, 1955, p.16.

2. Alan Thomas. "The Learning Society," In J.R. Kidd, ed. Learning and Society. Toronto: Canadian Association for Adult Education, 1963, p.406.

3. J. R. Kidd. Education for Perspective. Toronto: Peter Martin Associates Limited, 1969, p.11.

4. Jean Capelle. The Development of Permanent Education in France. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1968, p.4.

5. Bertrand Schwartz. "A Prospective View of Permanent Education" In Permanent Education. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1970, p.56.

6. John Ohliger. "Lifelong Learning - Voluntary or Compulsory." Adult Leadership. Vol. 17, No. 3, September 1968, p.124.

7. John Ohliger and Colleen McCarthy. Lifelong Learning or Lifelong Schooling? Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Publications in Continuing Education and ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult Education, 1971, p.12.

8. Malcolm Knowles. The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy versus Pedagogy. New York: Association Press, 1970, pp. 53-54.

9. John W. C. Johnstone and Ramon J. Rivera. Volunteers for Learning. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1965, p.1.

10. Darrell Anderson and John A. Niemi. Adult Education and the Disadvantaged Adult. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Publications in Continuing Education and ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult Education, 1970, pp. 29-30.

11. Dorothy Todd Henaut. "The Media: Powerful Catalyst for Community Change." In John A. Niemi, ed. Mass Media and Adult Education. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Educational Technology Publications, 1971, pp. 121-122.

12. Paulo Freire. "Cultural Action and Conscientization." Harvard Educational Review. Vol. 40, No. 3, August 1970, p.452.

ERIC Clearinghouse
NOV 27 1972
on Adult Education